



# Washington State Department of Agriculture News Release

For immediate release: April 15, 2003 (03-19)

WASHINGTON STATE DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE

Contact: Kevin Bouchey, Asparagus Commission (509) 728-0594 P.O. Box 42560, Olympia, Washington 98504-2560  
Linda Waring (360) 902-1815

*Look for the purple tips!*

## **Asparagus: Washington's 1<sup>st</sup> crop of the year available to supermarkets this week**

OLYMPIA – The state Department of Agriculture (WSDA) today announced the first harvest of 2003. Fresh Washington asparagus will be available to grocery stores around the state this week. “Now is a perfect time for consumers to taste the difference between fresh locally grown products and those that take a long ride into the state from other parts of the U.S. or the world,” says Valoria Loveland, director of WSDA.

“Washington consumers can support jobs in their own communities by asking for and buying Washington-grown food and agricultural products,” says Loveland. The food and agricultural industry is the state’s largest employer with more than 170,000 employees. Annually it generates \$28 billion to the state economy, or about 12 percent.

Washington is the second largest U.S. producer of asparagus, behind California. However, Washington’s crop is unique. “Our warm spring days and cool nights provide excellent growing conditions for sweeter tasting, unique purple tips that you won’t find on asparagus from other places,” says Kevin Bouchey, chairman of the Washington Asparagus Commission. “Furthermore, Washington asparagus is fresher and is more reasonably priced thanks to savings in shipping and freight costs.”

With the trend toward healthier diets, asparagus is starting to take a regular place in meal planning rather than being reserved for special occasions. Asparagus is a natural source of folic acid, which is important to blood cell formation and prevention of birth defects. It also contains an anti-carcinogen and antioxidant.

Harvest season runs from April to June when 350 growers in the Columbia Basin, Yakima Valley and Walla Walla will produce around 80 million pounds of asparagus. This harvest will be shipped to virtually every state in the nation and to Europe and Asia.

Washington’s asparagus industry faces many challenges, especially increased competition from Peru, Mexico and California. Washington’s first crop of the season accounts for 10 percent of the state’s vegetable acreage, about 15,000 acres. This is down 2,000 acres from last year, and down 4,000 acres from 2001. Asparagus is still the state’s 17<sup>th</sup> most valuable crop and is the fourth largest employer of seasonal farm workers.

###